

Mr. Obama, speak up for human rights in China

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Dear Mr. President:

I understand that when you meet Chinese President Hu Jintao this week, you will engage on some of the most complex international matters facing our two countries. Trade, currency exchange, peace on the Korean Peninsula, and arms sales to and relations with Taiwan are but a few of the urgent issues.

I want to respectfully point you toward an even more fundamental complexity in the relationship that must be addressed. Assuming it is the goal of both countries to improve and expand on the political and economic foundation for a mutually beneficial relationship, this issue simply will not go away.

It is the matter of how Mr. Hu's government treats its citizens.

Today, Liu Xiaobo, the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, and thousands, if not tens of thousands, of other Chinese citizens are in prison simply for expressing their opinions.

Mr. President, as a fellow Nobel Peace Prize laureate, you above all others must appreciate the profound incongruity of representing one population - a people who benefit from guaranteed democratic rights and privileges enshrined in the U.S. Constitution - while attempting to co-exist, do business with and grow alongside a population denied such fundamental rights.

Whatever the progress on short-term matters, if the long-term issues surrounding China's need for progress on human rights and its democratization are not addressed, an increasingly difficult and unanswerable series of problems will evolve into a situation that cannot be avoided.

The question, then, is when to raise discussion about the long road ahead, rather than focusing on more immediate crises. Here is one suggestion.

At some point during this visit, even over dinner at the White House tonight, you might privately ask the Chinese president about his feelings as the son of someone who was found to be a bad element by a previous iteration of his party. Hu's father was denounced by the Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution.

Clearly, Hu knows that without democracy - what Lech Walesa called a government's conversation with its people - anyone can end up on the wrong side of a political debate. Perhaps at that point you might note that Liu Xiaobo would be just the latest example of the consequences of that missing conversation. You should then ask Hu, politely but firmly, to free Liu Xiaobo and fellow political prisoners such as Gao Zhisheng, Liu Xianbin and Wang Bingzhang.

Hu is said to have a nearly photographic memory. Yet even he will not be able to recall any section of Chinese law that permits the detention of individuals without cause. You might ask why Liu Xiaobo's wife, Liu Xia, continues to be held under house arrest by Beijing authorities even though she has not been accused of committing a crime at any time.

Pressing the leaders of China's government to move along a democratic path is not just in the best interest of both the United States and China. Given the size and importance of the Chinese population, it is in the interest of all humanity. Moving China toward democracy starts with the release of its dissenters and political prisoners and with the removal of restrictions on innocent civilians such as Liu Xia. The more humanitarian the Chinese regime becomes, the lower the cost to Chinese men and women of standing up against remaining repressions, such as arbitrary detention, harassment, unfair wages, media censorship and the one-child policy. Gradually, the heroic work of dissidents will become the more common practice of everyday people.

This process can be facilitated by your willingness to face this reality. Equally critical, as the statesman Edmund Burke noted, is the fact that all it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.

Yes, it will be awkward to use this visit to raise these issues. Hu, the leader of a resurgent China, of course may be reluctant to hear from you on these topics, privately or publicly. But this is your opportunity, Mr. President. I respectfully urge you not to let the moment pass you by.

The writer is president of Initiatives for China and a Harvard fellow. He served a five-year prison term in China, from 2002 to 2007, for attempting to observe labor unrest. He is the liaison to the Nobel Peace Prize Committee on behalf of Liu Xia, the wife of Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo, who is serving 11 years in prison for his writings.